

“By Water to Wakefield”: The Barnsley Canal

Notes on John Goodchild’s talk at Wakefield Archives, 30th April

John Goodchild’s third talk was on the subject of the Barnsley Canal which joined the Aire and Calder Navigation below Heath, rising by fifteen locks to the summit at Walton. From there the canal ran through Royston to Barugh where a further five locks lifted the canal via Barnsley to the terminus at Barnby Basin. The route included two cuttings, and an aqueduct which took the canal over the Dearne valley. A junction with the Dearne and Dove Canal just south of Barnsley gave access to the Don Navigation.

The impetus to construct a canal through to Barnsley was the need for efficient transport for coal from the collieries mining the rich Barnsley and Silkstone seams to other parts of Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire. Barnsley was an administrative centre on one of the main roads north, but the roads were not sufficient to carry large quantities of coal which was therefore restricted mainly to local use. Other products included iron wire, linen cloth and glass bottles which had been carried by road to the Don Navigation at Swinton. Thus there was great potential for increased trade.

In 1792 a committee was set up by the Aire and Calder Navigation Company; the superintendents being William Martin treasurer, William Gott surveyor and Elias Wright land agent. Their ideas were put to William Jessop who had worked with John Smeaton at Walton, and he became consulting engineer. Officers of the Aire and Calder Navigation met with officers of the Don Navigation to forge an agreement on how to further their plans. It was thought that £60,000 would be needed and in 1793, at a meeting in the White Bear at Barnsley chaired by Smeaton, a subscription list was opened for investors and quickly filled. James Hebden, a lawyer, was employed as Secretary at £50 per annum. A Parliamentary Bill was planned for the next session in 1793 and petitions were presented to Parliament in support of the scheme from such places as York, Selby and Rochdale. There were some objections by landowners including Theobald Dillon of Heath who claimed the canal was too close to his mansion house. However the bill was given the royal assent in June 1793 in preference to other schemes.

There were 113 shareholders which included landowners such as the Duke of Leeds, gentry and some more substantial tradesmen. 30% were shareholders in both the Barnsley Canal and the Dearne and Dove Canal. A powerful executive committee was established to enact the plans including Thomas Waterton of Walton who acted as a negotiator between the gentlemen whose agreement was needed.

In July 1793 stone was ordered for the locks at Heath, of which there were originally three. A still-existing house on the Doncaster Road which was at the original number 3 lock, has two doors as it was used both for the lock-keeper and the land agent. A brick building behind the house was a blacksmith’s workshop, needed to shoe the canal horses.

Fifteen contractors provided plans, and the contract was given to John Pinkerton of Cawthorne who was well known nationally. The first sod was cut on 15th September 1793 and work started on the locks at Agbrigg and the cuttings at Walton and Cold Hiendley. Horse gins were used to take up stone and earth from the cuttings and pumps employed to get the water out. Three steam engines were originally employed but these were found to be too expensive, so a reservoir was constructed at Winterset. This was filled both from small streams and from the canal at time of plentiful supply, and then returned to the canal when needed at time of low water levels. The committee decided to provide six boats which could be used to transport building materials, gins, horses, wood and other necessities.

By 1799 the canal was completed to Barnsley and a carnival was held in celebration. The church bells were rung and a sloop was borrowed from the Aire and Calder Company carrying small cannon which were fired. By 1802 the Barnsley Canal was finished to its terminus at Barnby Bridge, and in 1804 the Dearne and Dove Canal was opened in full. Warehousing, toll houses and lock houses were built and wharves provided at Barnsley and Barnby Bridge.

From the 1820s there were boats designed to carry the coal from the pithead through to London. These 'Billyboys' were high sided vessels with a keel to stop them rolling as they travelled via the Aire and Calder to the Humber, and hugging the coast, down to London. However the bridges were not high enough to let these pass, and they were heightened.

Dividends reached 10% in the 1850s but never rose above this level. With the coming of the railways tolls were reduced in order to compete, and the Aire and Calder Company was able to buy at 2¼%. The locks were lengthened in the 1880s in order to take larger vessels. Trade continued into the 20th century and the canal continued to be active until the 1940s with coal being taken down the canal, and sand taken upstream for the glassworks. However subsidence caused great problems and in 1953 it was decided to abandon the canal.

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